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ABSTRACT

This guide for managers of programs for people with developmental disabilities outlines key principles and issues in the decision-making process, and offers tips for building coalitions and negotiating the interests of consumers, families, board members, employees, and community leaders. Ten to 25 guidelines are offered for each of six decision-making areas: (1) making executive decisions and developing a vision (e.g., develop a written plan, accept responsibility, and develop professional relationships); (2) making financial decisions and managing resources (e.g., consider "what if" questions as part of the budget process and find funding from a variety of sources); (3) making decisions that affect consumers and setting priorities (remember that the individuals you serve are top priority, review decisions about risk regularly, and start a consumer advisory group); (4) making decisions that affect families and focusing on common interests (develop personal relationships with families, learn to handle criticism from families, and include families on the board of directors); (5) making decisions that affect your staff and unite the organization (involve staff in key decisions, encourage professional development, and serve as a model to your staff); and (6) making educated decisions and developing a system of measures (gather firsthand information before responding to concerns and develop a prevention-focused system of inspection). (DB)

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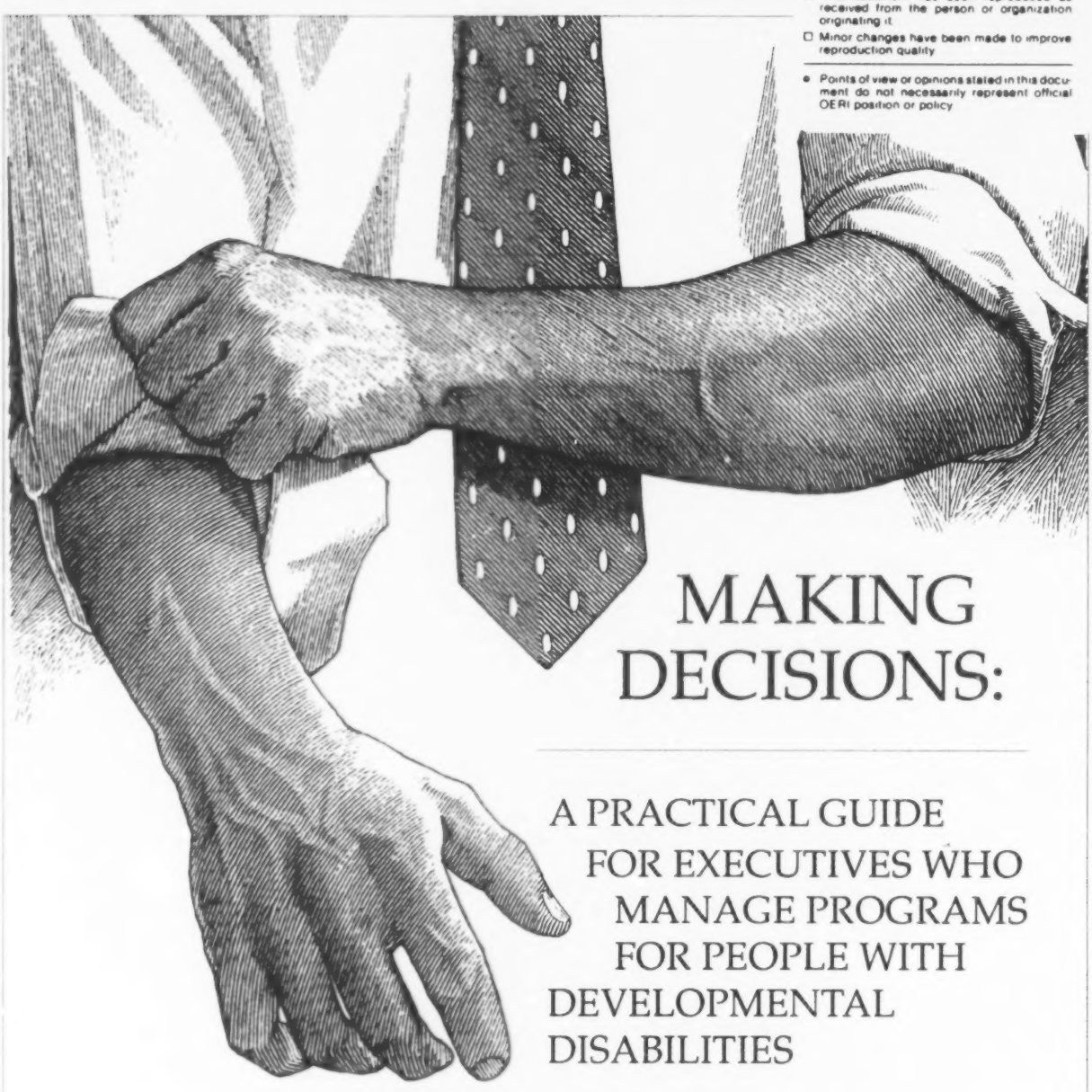

MAKING DECISIONS:

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR EXECUTIVES WHO MANAGE PROGRAMS FOR PEOPLE WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

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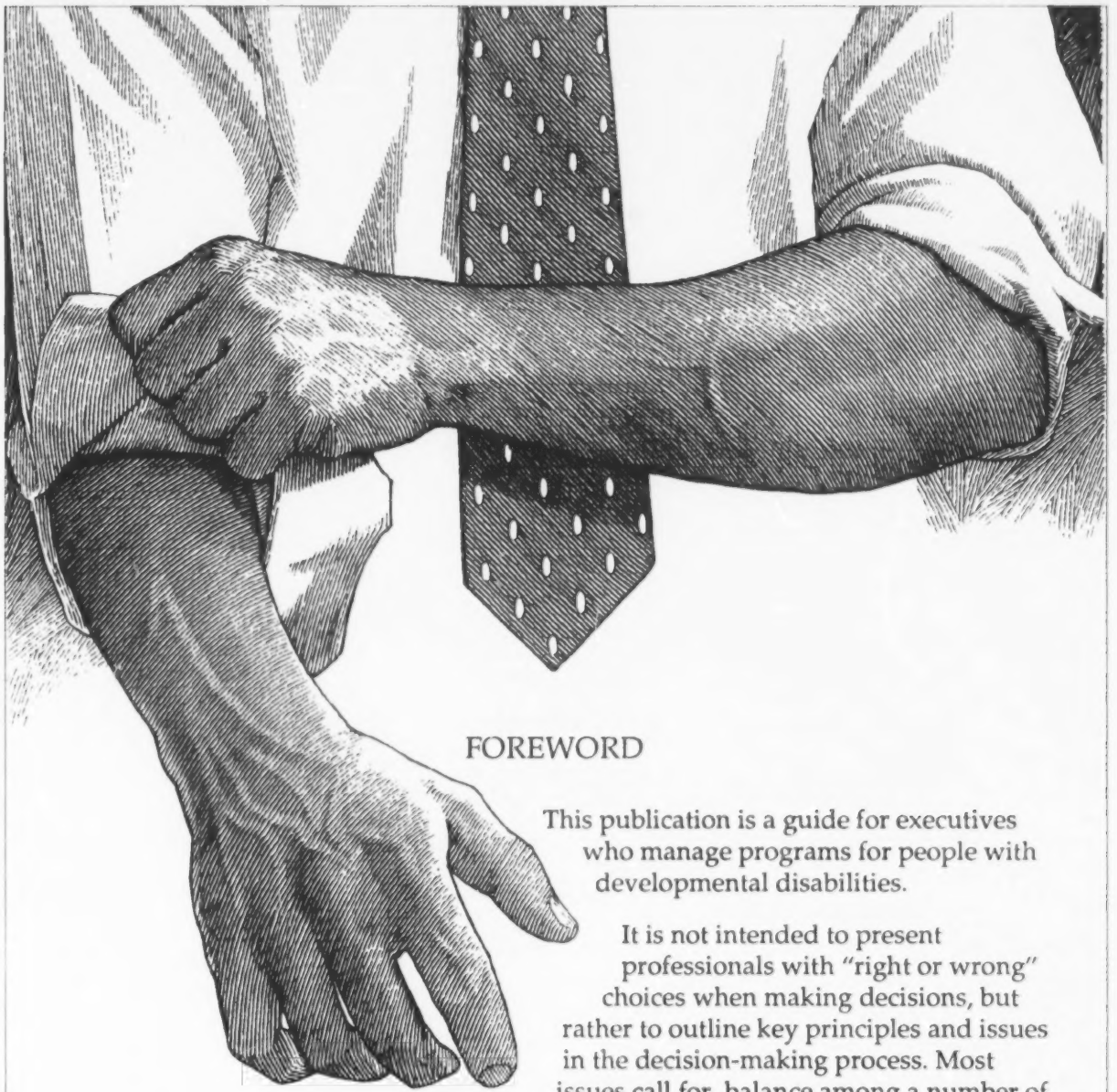

FOREWORD

This publication is a guide for executives who manage programs for people with developmental disabilities.

It is not intended to present professionals with "right or wrong" choices when making decisions, but rather to outline key principles and issues in the decision-making process. Most issues call for balance among a number of competing principles. This guide outlines some of the competing principles and calls attention to health and safety issues.

The guide also offers tips for building coalitions and negotiating the interests of consumers, families, board members, employees and community leaders.

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INTRODUCTION

Executive responsibilities vary, according to the size, purpose and role of organizations that serve people with developmental disabilities. However, some common principles apply for most organizations.

Typically, executives are responsible for developing a vision or plan for the future of the agency. This vision should be supported by a broad coalition of board members, families, consumers and staff.

To develop the vision, executives must seek resources from government and private sources. They are also responsible for educating political and community leaders, to make the organization a functional part of the community. These leaders must understand and support needs of people with developmental disabilities and the organization's financial needs.

Executives must collect and study data to make educated choices about the quality and efficiency of services provided by their agency. They should be knowledgeable about other agencies which provide services to non-disabled people and recognize these as an important resource for people with developmental disabilities. Services provided by generic service agencies should be coordinated with unique services provided by the developmental disabilities agency.

This guide emphasizes skill in building coalitions and negotiating different points of view among consumers, parents, board members, staff and community leaders. Emphasis is also placed on ensuring the health and safety of individuals served by the agency while adhering to their rights and wishes.

MAKING EXECUTIVE DECISIONS: DEVELOPING A VISION

- **Develop a written plan for your agency's future.** Focus the plan to meet the needs of individuals, rather than programs. The plan should include the role of other agencies in your community. Make sure board members, families, consumers and staff understand and support the plan. Use the plan as a road map, but revise and update it on a regular basis.

- **Accept responsibility for the challenges you face.** Do not blame problems and shortcomings on others.

- **Always make your board, your boss and the people who work for you look good.** Never make them look bad. Accept responsibility for problems yourself.

- **Work with your board members to develop a written document which describes your role as a manager.** Be specific. Outline your authority and responsibility as well as the authority and responsibility of the board.

- **Help your board evaluate your performance and your agency's performance annually, based on planned goals and objectives.**

- **If there are problems with board members, let the board deal directly with these problems.**

- **Use other local agencies to help your programs and the people you serve.** Do not assume that if another agency, such as the fire marshal, does not do something that you will **not** be held responsible for the quality of your program and for the welfare of the persons served.

- **See services from other agencies as a resource for the people you serve. Do not see them as competition.**

- **Take pride in the accomplishments of board members and staff, consumers and their families as well as your own accomplishments.**

- **Volunteer with local organizations which support people with mental retardation and their families.**

- **Join local civic and professional organizations, such as the Chamber of Commerce, United Way, and other groups.** Ask your staff to do the same.

- **Meet regularly with key officials that you contact during crises, including members of the local media, the solicitor, fire chief, police chief, mayor, etc.** Get to know them, before you need them.

- **Develop professional relationships with local legislators and council members.** Educate them about your programs and introduce them to the people you serve. Ask your board and family organization to help. Local leaders determine the pattern of community acceptance for people with developmental disabilities.
- **Read your mail and respond to phone messages every day.**
- **Make things happen. Don't wait for others to take the lead.**
- **Use an honest and understanding approach with the families you serve and members of the media when things go wrong.** Reassure them that everything possible is being done to prevent reoccurrence. Demonstrate the empathy you feel for the person(s) affected.
- **When things are important, difficult, or controversial, take time to visit the area and see things for yourself.**
- **Come early. Stay late. Be there during problems and crises.** Demonstrate your concern to others. If you do not give the impression you care, no one else will.
- **Perception is most important.** Your program will be judged by the physical appearance of its buildings, its staff and the people it serves.
- **No decision is permanent. Set up a system to review policies, procedures and plans at regular intervals.**

MAKING FINANCIAL DECISIONS: MANAGING RESOURCES

- **Identify the most important needs of individuals served by your agency and find funding from a variety of sources to meet those needs.**
- **Develop a written plan of action to balance the increasing need for services (waiting lists) with the quality of services provided and staff compensation.**
- **Establish a budget system that starts at the lowest level. Make sure staff feel free to ask for what they need and don't assume that resources are not available.**
- **As part of an annual budget process, consider "what if" questions such as: "What if we had to operate with 5 percent less next year?" or "What if we had to reduce the number of positions for a particular program?" Always consider the impact for individuals and families who receive services.**
- **Look beyond your own budget to solve problems.** Develop new resources with flexible funds to meet individual needs that can't be met with inflexible state or federal funds.
- **Prepare budgets when developing the organization's annual work plan and objectives.** Consider what products and services the funds will purchase in addition to dollar amounts.
- **In times of budget cutbacks, top executive should set an example.** Even though restrictions in areas such as travel and equipment may not produce significant savings, these limitations send a signal to staff.
- **Create family organizations, private fund-raising organizations and foundations.**
- **Cultivate funding from United Way, Easter Seals , civic organizations and other local resources.**

- **Ask family and volunteer organizations to help you raise flexible dollars to educate the public, encourage one-to-one relationships between people with developmental disabilities and other members of their communities, and accomplish other tasks.**

- **Maintain good communication with local governments. Invite local officials to tour programs. Submit annual budget requests to local governments and ask for time on their agendas to present the requests.**

- **Seek in-kind donations from local governments including land, buildings and administrative assistance.**

- **Manage your budget carefully.** Do not carry surplus funds. Surplus funds can be as dangerous as a deficit. Consider setting aside funds for capital and future needs in your financial plan. These are not surplus funds.

- **Establish financial systems that allow you to "pull in the reigns " on spending when necessary. Make sure your financial reporting system allows you to pinpoint your financial fitness at any point during the year.**

- **Avoid the appearance of impropriety.** Do not accept free meals, borrow agency equipment or make purchases from friends. Lead by example and explain ethical issues to your staff.

- **Consider cost savings from contracting services instead of providing those services in-house.**

- **Monitor financial indicators such as deficits, surpluses, flexible funds, individual Mediciad eligibility, income on sort-term investments, outstanding debts, and revenue from outside resources.**

- **Use an auditor's checklist to evaluate internal accounting and administrative controls to ensure that all of the agency's assets are well protected.** These assets should include buildings, equipment, vehicles, cash, supplies and human resources.

- **At the end of each fiscal year, conduct program audits along with financial audits.** Program audits address the question of how well your agency met its program objectives—they tell what your agency accomplished with the money it spent.

- **Work toward in-house preparation of financial statements for presentation to auditors.** These statements belong to the agency, not the auditors.

- **Ensure that an annual financial audit is complete on a timely basis—within three to four months after the fiscal year end.** Follow up on points listed in the management letter immediately.

MAKING DECISIONS THAT AFFECT CONSUMERS: SETTING PRIORITIES

- **The individuals you serve are top priority.** Their welfare precedes program goals and needs.
- **While fairness and balance are most important— when you are in doubt, err on the side of the safety and protection of people with developmental disabilities, rather than employee issues.**
- **While fairness and balance are important, when in doubt, err on the side of the individual's safety and protection, when this is in conflict with the person's rights.**
- **Consider all choices involved in a particular situation.** Give everyone the opportunity to explain their opinion.
- **Review decisions about risk regularly, especially when an incident occurs.** Conduct this review, if there is no critical injury involved.
- **No decision is permanent.** Set up a system to regularly review decisions related to the people you serve.
- **Seek third party mediation, if there is conflict between the agency's best interest and the best interests of individuals served.** Human rights committees, client advocates and— as a last resort—judges, can all be helpful.
- **Case managers represent each individual's best interest when working with other agencies and your board. Respect the independence of their role.**
- **Helping hostile and aggressive people is part of your job.** Make sure your staff know it is a part of their job, also, and help them develop proper communication skills.
- **Individuals in your service system should have priority over those waiting for services in most cases.**
- **Start a consumer advisory group and meet with the group regularly to seek advice.**
- **Your agency should hire workers with developmental disabilities for regular jobs with regular benefits, as an example for other business leaders to follow.** Try to focus on strengths and avoid weaknesses for all employees— disabled or not.
- **Include individuals who receive services from your agency on its board of directors.**

MAKING DECISIONS THAT AFFECT FAMILIES: FOCUSING ON COMMON INTERESTS

- **Show respect for the rights and wishes of families. Family members are "always" right.**
- **Develop personal relationships with families.** They need to know you and your key staff to develop trust in your judgement and concern.
- **Always respond to telephone calls from family members.** Do not ask other staff members to return these calls.
- **Encourage staff to refer family concerns to you, if they cannot solve them successfully.**
- **Learn to handle criticism from families—even hostile criticism.** Make sure staff also realize that dealing with criticism is part of their jobs. Help your staff develop skills to respond to criticism and make sure they know you are ready to help them, if they need you. Never threaten families with transfer or dismissal of their family member, if they are not satisfied with the services you are providing.
- **Focus on areas of agreement rather than disagreement.** Concentrate on common interests. Separate the problem or differences from the people involved.
- **As part of your agency's evaluation plan, ask the following questions: Are services consumer or family centered? Do families have to wait long periods of time to receive services? Could other inconveniences be avoided? Do staff greet families with a helpful and friendly attitude?**
- **Your actions should always demonstrate concern for people you serve and their families.**
- **Meet family needs for assistance, but do not take over, unless you are requested to do so.**
- **Allow families to make all critical decisions about their child's welfare, unless this is not possible.** Be sure families understand their role as agents of change.
- **When helping families make critical decisions, admit that you do not know all of the answers.** Be willing to search for answers and express this to the family, also.
- **Focus on strengths. Families respond best to a positive approach.** Help families keep negative thoughts in perspective.
- **Always inform families, if something major occurs involving their child— especially if a problem occurs.**

- **Develop a family organization.** Go to all meetings unless you are asked not to participate. Offer assistance with clerical and mailing tasks. Help the organization develop a monitorship committee to visit all program locations. Meet with monitoring teams to discuss their written and verbal comments.

- **In addition to participating in monitorship, help your family organization develop programs and services such as support groups, citizen advocacy services, fund-raising and public policy awareness.**

- **Build coalitions between different family organizations.** Bridge the gap between families and family organizations with specialized interests, such as organizations that serve families who receive residential care, instead of family support; organizations that serve families of children, instead of adults and organizations that serve families of people with specific developmental disabilities. Factionism is a real enemy.

- **Include families who receive services from your agency on the board of directors.**

MAKING DECISIONS THAT AFFECT YOUR STAFF: UNITING THE ORGANIZATION

- **Involve staff in key decisions.** Staff involvement will strengthen your organization.
- **Meet with your staff to set goals and develop a mutual "working plan".**
- **Provide appropriate training to all new employees.** Never put a person on the job without appropriate training.
- **Make sure staff understand what you expect of them. Provide the training they need to complete each task.**
- **Meet with your staff regularly to foster positive communication.**
- **If disciplinary action is required, be consistent and calm.** Discuss staff actions in relationship to your expectations, but do not place blame or directly criticize the employee for their decisions. Focus on steps for improvement and offer your assistance.
- **Encourage professional development.** Support training efforts and encourage participation in professional organizations.
- **Listen and accept constructive criticism from your staff.** Remember they want you to succeed and share your concern for the agency's welfare.
- **Use positive management practices.** Recognize staff accomplishments. Point out staff strengths and contributions.
- **Serve as a model to your staff.** Keep a positive attitude and demonstrate commitment to your agency's ideals.
- **Reward staff who exhibit exemplary performance.** The reward may be as simple as writing a thank you note for a job well done. Find ways to boost staff morale.
- **Separate people from problems.** If staff perceptions are inaccurate, look for ways to educate. If issues become emotional, help staff let off steam. If misunderstanding exists, work to improve communication.
- **Practice MBWA (Management By Walking Around). Set aside time to visit staff in action on all shifts.** Talk with them about their goals and specific duties. Use praise on the spot when positive action is observed.

MAKING EDUCATED DECISIONS: DEVELOPING A SYSTEM OF MEASURES

- **Gather firsthand information, before you respond to concerns expressed by individuals, staff, consumers or others.**
- **Always try to have information available to assist in making decisions.** Measure progress and, more importantly, lack of progress.
- **Develop measures related to the individuals you serve.** Include developmental measures of individuals as well as groups. Use measures of movement to less restrictive settings, both within and between programs, and quality of life measures.
- **Keep track of individual citations identified in reviews, such as self-surveys, state agency surveys, health department surveys and parent reviews.** Develop and monitor work plans to solve these problems.
- **Develop and review data related to personnel, such as turnovers, sick leave, accident leave, overtime, temporary personnel utilization, grievances filed and other indicators.**
- **Develop a prevention focused system of inspection.** Monitor the physical environment, particularly aspects related to safety and the quality of life, including privacy. Include housekeeping, maintenance and other personnel in the process.
- **Develop a system of inspections to prevent mistakes, but above all, to learn from mistakes. The system should include:**

  Your personal involvement through sites visits with key staff;

  Personal training for people who act on your behalf on evenings and weekends. Teach them what to look for and how to react in critical situations;

  Personal involvement on some evenings and weekends, not just those when parent or board meetings are held;

  A system of after-hours and weekend checks, especially in residential locations. These checks let staff know you care and give you the opportunity to reward them for appropriate behavior. This is a better focus than trying to catch staff performing inappropriate behavior.

- **Include self-inspections, professional inspections, Officer of the Day inspections, family inspections and any other types you can think of.** Be sure inspections focus on the most important issues related to health, safety and individual accountability—not just on "paper compliance."

- **Study all accidents and injuries.** Help your organization learn from these incidents. Usually, people respond quickly to their mistakes. Organizations do not usually respond, unless a system is in place to outline what will be looked at and who will be responsible for implementation of required changes.

- **Look beyond the immediate cause of each accident to see how the system can be changed to make reoccurrence less likely.** Investigate in the way our society investigates an airplane crash, as opposed to an automobile accident.

CONCLUSION

- **Health and safety issues are essential.** Active treatment and other program issues are also important, but they are secondary.
- **The best quality of life for most people with developmental disabilities is gained by supporting them and/or their families to maintain their regular home environment.** Family-like units of four people or less are an option, if the natural family unit cannot stay together.
- **Movement from group homes to less restrictive environments and eventually to supported living arrangements is the equivalent of deinstitutionalization for the 1990s.** Independent jobs for people with severe disabilities instead of sheltered workshop placement is also a natural progression. Institutionalization and institutional thinking are not restricted to large residential settings, but exist in many community settings as well.
- **Living in the community does not automatically make someone an active member of that community.** Services for people with developmental disabilities must achieve pure integration and interaction without sacrificing health or safety.
- **The executive's job is tense.** Coalitions, inspection and response systems can help you manage stress and reach key agency goals.

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